

Barnard Elementary

Educating for the World

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY HEATHER SCHOELL

Eleven years ago, a pint-sized woman by the name of Dr. Shirley Hopkinson took over the ailing Barnard Elementary School at 430 Decatur St. NW. As principal, she hired a much-needed school psychologist, Dr. Grace Reid, and they set to work. Today, the school occupies a new structure built in 2003, Hopkinson is the principal of the Lincoln Hill Cluster (Barnard Elementary, Powell Elementary and MacFarland Middle School), and Reid has moved up the ranks to campus leader. The two school matriarchs work in tandem. With one eye on the world and another on the future, Barnard is all about teaching the kids as they are.

Teaching to the Student

“We have high expectations of our students,” said Reid. “There are no excuses for not learning.”

Hopkinson added, “We use the [Lorraine] Monroe Doctrine ... the ‘no excuses’ doctrine of education. The student’s background is extraneous variables. What they come from, we can’t control. The school has control over teaching children, and that’s what we will do,” she said. “One pearl I remind my teachers of is, ‘Commit to teaching the children we have, not the ones we’d like to have.’”

Barnard goes to fourth grade and offers both Head Start for 3- and 4-year-olds, as

well as preschool and pre-kindergarten. “I’m teaching them how to converse,” said the librarian, Mr. Alpha Jalloh, of 3-year-old Head Start students. “We’re using manipulatives, learning how to speak in conversation.”

“We have a cadre of really committed teachers,” said Reid. “There is low turnover, and a lot of nights, the custodians have to ask them to leave! Students are our focus – it’s not just a cliché. That’s who we’re here for.”

Readers are Leaders

Books are displayed on small tables everywhere you turn in this sizable building of 378 students. “Eleven years ago, Barnard was 11 percent proficient ... we needed to start a push for reading through interest,” explained Hopkinson. “I cut out morning recess – turned that period of 7:30 to 8:15 a.m. into Morning Reading Assembly,” she said. “The first two years I brought in hundreds of books. ... The third year we started transitioning books into homes. The mobile library has come out of that. It sends the message that we value reading as a life skill.” Now Barnard has a partnership with Verizon, which provides at least 900 books per year.

“Morning Assembly,” explained parent volunteer Marlece Turner, “is that every morning the kids meet in the gym for exercise and the school pledge. Then they get a book

while the teachers meet collaboratively.” Turner chose Barnard for her son Ellington. “The friendly atmosphere, the teachers – everybody ... it’s the best-kept secret,” she said. “Dr. Reid will tell you, ‘It’s all about the children.’ She always has time for them.”

Barnard has tested in the DC CAS at 66 percent proficient for reading and 56 percent for math for both



ABOVE: Students dance to music from around the globe.

LEFT: Barnard’s entrance is open and uplifting.

RIGHT: Pre-k students’ work is displayed.



2007 and 2008. In 2009, scores jumped to 85 percent and 80 percent respectively. “We are a school of choice, a receiving school,” said Hopkinson. “Forty-five percent of our students are out-of-bounds.”

“Barnard gave my kids a start to be where they are now,” said Noel Blanchard, father of a college student and a high school senior, and a long-time Barnard volunteer. “That’s why I do everything I can to help out.”

Autism Speaks Here

Barnard seems to have found a niche among schools by offering an integrated autistic program. “The program is now in its sixth year,” said Hopkinson, who wears an Autism Speaks lapel pin. “Anne Gay, who was the assistant superintendent for special education, asked us to start this program. We pledged the space, and the central office pledged the materials for the program.” The program began, but the materials hadn’t been delivered, but they made it work that first year. Six years later, they have a waiting list.

The program, able to accept about seven new students per year, is for identified autistic children from preschool to fifth grade, with a ratio of one teacher and two aides to six students, with some students having dedicated aides. “We have the best batch of teachers, Hopkinson said. “We’ve made a difference in the lives of 21 students a year.”

Not unlike Barnard’s approach to teaching English Language Learners (ELL, formerly known as ESL) and special education students, “The students are mainstreamed wherever possible,” Hopkinson explained. “People come into the school and ask, ‘Where are the autistic kids?’ We do not make a distinction – they do music, library, art and P.E. with the rest of the kids. I have a faith about children – if you have your faculties – if you do not have brain damage but can wake up in the morning and have all your faculties, you can learn.”

“At a recent parent meeting, one mother gave a tearful account of how she had been told her child would never speak, but the teachers at Barnard had believed in him, worked really hard with him and he is now talking,” said Chancellor Michelle Rhee. “Stories like this highlight the dedicated staff, the high expectations, and all the work teachers and staff do with students every day. Parents can expect to find differentiated instruction both individually and in small groups, along with many opportunities for inclusion to ensure strong growth both academically and socially.”

Little Lessons, Big Impacts

Two things at Barnard stand out as being small lessons with the potential for reworking the fabric of the community. The first is the formerly wasted space that, with the help of Project Learning Tree, has become Barnard’s herb gardens, growing culinary plants to flavor the meals of the Armed Forces

Retirement Home.

Another impactful lesson, which Barnard is just getting off the ground, is an exciting adventure in entrepreneurship called Micro Society. Students of all ages – lessons are tailored to learning level – will learn to create business plans, about bank lending, taxes and wages. There are components of economics, technology, citizenship and humanities. “We want to teach the children how to be producers, not always consumers,” said Hopkinson. “To save their dollars instead of spending it all at the corner store.”



TOP TO BOTTOM: Librarian Mr. Alpha Jalloh with a Head Start student.

Dr. Grace Reid visits with students at recess.

Green space and a new playground.



A World Within

Poland, El Salvador, Ghana, Taiwan, Jamaica, Guiana, Senegal, Panama, Antigua, Peru, Nicaragua, Texas, Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania and DC – this is an incomplete list of the places where Barnard staff are from originally. “We celebrate the diversity of our staff – it is one part of our success,” said Reid. Teachers’ photographs are placed on a world map in the foyer, marking their origins, and a wall of flags in the gym represents the students’ origins. World culture is celebrated in reading books, in music class and incorporated into Barnard’s everyday activities.

Reid wishes to take Barnard’s globalization one step further, by using technology to give students ac-

cess to the world through distance learning. “We do not educate children for this neighborhood,” said Hopkinson, “we educate them for the world.”

To learn more about Barnard Elementary, call 202-576-1100 or visit www.barnardelementary.org.

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